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ABSTRACT

A 20-item questionnaire covering student attitudes, school and nonschool activities, problem behaviors, and family life was administered to 200 students in 10 rural Tennessee high schools. Subjects were randomly selected from a group that had low achievement scores, excessive absences, and failures in two or more academic subjects. Over half of respondents thought that education was not important, and nearly three-fourths did not enjoy school work. However, 70 percent planned to graduate from high school. About two-thirds were employed. Over 60 percent of respondents had divorced parents, and 42 percent reported moving two or more times while in high school. About 70 percent reported poor communication with parents or other family members. A large majority had never been suspended, did not consider themselves "problem students," and had never had problems with the law. Only 27 percent were involved in extracurricular activities. The majority of respondents did not "feel good about themselves." Recommendations include efforts to improve the quality of communication between at-risk students and their families, attitudes about the value of education, student self-esteem, and involvement of at-risk students in extracurricular activities and all facets of the school program. (SV)

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A STUDY TO DETERMINE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS IN SELECTED RURAL HIGH SCHOOLS IN MIDDLE TENNESSEE

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Introduction

Lack of success in school among at-risk students is a tremendous loss to society. Many at-risk students either drop out of school or do not achieve at the level of which they are capable. By the year 2,000 the number of students "giving up" on education will approximate 2,000,000. Tragically, many of these students may drop out of society, the work force, or the American way of life. (1)

Phi Delta Kappa, an international organization of professional educators, conducted a comprehensive research project entitled, "A Study of Students At-Risk," which addressed this serious problem. (2) Over 21,000 students were included in their study which was the most extensive research project in the organization's history. Dr. Jack Frymier, Phi Delta Kappa Senior Fellow, managed the project. (3)

This study is designed to review issues concerning at-risk students in a rural school environment. The questions used in the study were adapted from the Phi Delta Kappa study. It is important to study this topic so that more information can be determined and appropriate action taken to assure that at-risk students have an opportunity for success in school and in life. The problems and conditions that put students at-risk can be solved when

service agencies adapt their programs and services to meet these students' special needs.

Organization of the Study

A sample of 200 students, chosen at random, from ten rural high schools in the middle region of Tennessee were used in this study. These students had "failed" two or more academic subjects, had low achievement scores, and excessive absences.

A questionnaire was developed to determine certain characteristics of at-risk students. The questionnaires were completed at each participating school under the direction of school personnel. Total anonymity of the student responses was assured to protect rights to privacy.

It is important that the level of awareness concerning at-risk students be increased. There are serious consequences to society if immediate action is not taken to alleviate this situation. Today's dropout was yesterday's at-risk student. (4)

School officials and educational policy makers are increasingly concerned about the characteristics of at-risk students. By these determinations more can be done to help students succeed. At-risk students have special needs and by identifying significant characteristics of these students educators can meet those needs. A commitment by school leaders, policy makers, and family members to address the

problem areas identified in this study will benefit school planning efforts for these students.

Presentation of the Data

The data are presented for each questionnaire item by number and percent. A reporting of the data follow.

1. Do you believe that education is important?

   Yes 94 (47%) No 106 (53%)

2. Are you employed outside of regular school hours?

   Yes 123 (61.5%) No 77 (38.5%)

3. Have you ever been suspended from school?

   Yes 36 (18%) No 164 (82%)

4. Do you use marijuana or other drugs on a regular basis (weekly)?

   Yes 22 (11%) No 178 (89%)

5. Do you drink beer or other alcholic beverages on a regular basis (weekly)?

   Yes 35 (17.5%) No 165 (82.5%)

6. Do you participate in extra-curricular activities at school?

   Yes 55 (27.5%) No 145 (72.5%)

7. Do you plan to graduate from high school?

   Yes 141 (70.5%) No 59 (29.5%)

8. Do you receive encouragement at home to do your best at school?

   Yes 64 (32%) No 136 (68%)

9. Can you discuss personal problems with your parents or other family members?

   Yes 64 (32%) No 136 (68%)

10. Do you smoke tobacco?

Yes 105 (52.5%) No 95 (47.5%)

11. Do you have a curfew (time you must be at home) on school nights?

Yes 120 (60%) No 80 (40%)

12. Is your health good?

Yes 168 (84%) No 32 (16%)

13. Have you ever been taken to juvenile court?

Yes 12 (6%) No 188 (94%)

14. Are you presently on probation?

Yes 4 (2%) No 196 (98%)

15. Do you consider yourself a "problem student"?

Yes 31 (15.5%) No 169 (84.5%)

16. Do you enjoy your school work?

Yes 54 (27%) No 146 (73%)

17. Are you a member of one of your high school's varsity teams?

Yes 32 (16%) No 168 (84%)

18. Are your parents divorced?

Yes 124 (62%) No 76 (38%)

19. While in high school did your family move frequently (two or more times)?

Yes 84 (42%) No 116 (58%)

20. Do you feel "good about yourself"?

Yes 73 (36.5%) No 127 (63.5%)

Report of the Findings

Over half of the respondents in this study thought that education was not important. Also, nearly three-fourths of the participants reported that they did not enjoy their school work. On the other hand, 70.5 percent indicated that they plan to graduate from high school.

It is noteworthy that 62 percent of the students involved were from "broken homes" and some 42 percent had moved two or more times while in high school. Nearly seven of every ten students stated that they did not get encouragement at home to do their best at school. It is noted that a similar number did not believe that they could discuss personal problems with parents or other family members. Most respondents (60%) reported that they had a curfew on school nights. Even so, about two-thirds were employed outside regular school hours.

A majority of the students (82 percent) stated that they had never been suspended from school and about 85 percent did not consider themselves as "problem students." Only four students in the study admitted that they were on probation; although, six percent of them had been taken to juvenile court.

Twenty-seven and a half percent of the students participated in extra-curricular activities, but only sixteen percent said they were members of a high school varsity team.

About one-half of the respondents (52.5% percent) indicated that they smoked tobacco. However, only eleven percent indicated that they used marijuana or other drugs on a regular basis. A slightly higher percent (17.5) indicated that they drank beer or other alcoholic beverages on a weekly basis. A majority considered the status of their health to be good. However, 63.5 percent of the students did not "feel good about themselves."

Recommendations

The following recommendations are warranted by this study.

1. There is a need for improvement in the quality of communication between at-risk students and their families.
2. The value of education and its affects upon success in life should be stressed by the school and family.
3. Special attention should be given to at-risk students concerning their lack of self-esteem and self-confidence.
4. Concerted efforts should be made to involve at-risk students in extra-curricular activities and other school programs.
5. Emphasis should be given to informing at-risk students about personal health and social issues to enable them to make informed decisions.

6. The school curriculum should be designed to ensure inclusion of at-risk students in all facets of the school program.

Acknowledgment

Appreciation is expressed to the students who participated in the study and other school personnel who assisted in collecting data for the study. Also, thanks is expressed to Ms. Edith Verble for her help in the compilation of the research study materials.

ENDNOTES

1. Edward J. McCaul, "Consquences of Dropping Out of School: Findings from High School and Beyond," The Journal of Education Research, March/April, 1992, vol. 85, no. 4, p. 198.

2. Jack Frymier,"Growing Up is Risky Business, and Schools are not to Blame", Phi Delta Kappa, 1992, p. 3.

3. Ibid.

4. Lauro Cavazos, "Building bridges for at-risk children", Education Digest, Novmeber, 1989, vol. 55, no. 3, p. 16.